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Gendering environmental sustainability and organization: Introduction

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This Special Issue brings together a collection of six papers to provide space for the exploration of gendered and feminist approaches to environmental sustainability, and to generate fresh insights into studies of work and organization in the context of environmental crises. The collection traverses disciplines and geographies to include philosophical, theoretical and empirical papers underpinned by a central question: How can gender-focused studies of work and organization contribute to our understanding of issues relating to the environment, sustainability and social justice? The papers cover how we might reimagine the Anthropocene and how discourses of 'sustainability' and 'development' are gendered; they argue for interconnectedness, and for the inclusion of care and of the social in a re-visioning of a more sustainable world. Thus, we argue, following Phillips (2014), that such approaches can provide a critical analysis of the gendered ways in which organizations, and organization studies, represent, construct and appropriate nature, how this affects our present and futures, and how we can develop strategies to subversively reimagine 'sustainability' in all its guises.

We need to do things differently, especially in the Global North. The evidence for this need piles up around us. Scientists are in almost total agreement that the Earth is warming due to anthropogenic climate change (e.g., Crutzen, 2006; Haber, Held, & Vogt, 2016). For example, polar and glacial ice is receding far more rapidly than expected and the Arctic tundra is melting. This will lead to even greater releases of greenhouse gasses and the darker areas uncovered by ice will absorb more heat (IPCC, 2014). It is a vicious circle. We can see for ourselves more intense and more frequent severe weather events such as heat waves, droughts and storms. The loss of habitat and species caused not only by climate change but also by insidious environmental degradation, intensive farming practices, hunting, tourism and urban expansion is leading to what can only be termed a genocide of other living beings (Igoe, Neves, & Brockington, 2011; World Wildlife Fund, 2016). Humans, and many other forms of life, face an existential crisis.

Yet, politicians and other institutions, including the business community, seem unable to act in the face of this crisis. Their interests are bound together while they are addicted to political and economic models premised on infinite growth and consumption. Efforts to address the gathering ecological catastrophe have therefore been described as a dismal failure (e.g., Phillips, 2017; Wittneben, Okereke, Banerjee, & Levy, 2012). Organizational responses are characterized by a business case approach based on obtaining competitive advantage (Bansal & Roth, 2000), finding a technical fix (Boiral, Cayer, & Baron, 2009) and greenwashing (Walker & Wan, 2012). Banerjee (2003) notes that: 'Rather than reshaping markets and production processes to fit the logic of nature, sustainable development uses the logic of markets and capitalist accumulation to determine the future of nature' (p. 153). The primacy of market forces, economic progress and technology remains largely unquestioned such that current discursive formations and material practices of sustainability limit possibilities for transformative change. The environment/nature is thus presented as a risk that should be ameliorated through mastery and domination or a market opportunity to be appropriated, commodified and

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consumed (Banerjee, 2003). These approaches are mainly emerging from the Global North, reproducing traditional power relations including a neo-colonial imperative to 'take the South along' (Igoe et al., 2011; Snijders, 2015).

Sara MacBride-Stewart, Rachel Simon-Kumar, Susan Baker and Lopa Saxena and Simon Irving and Jenny Helin in this issue argue that this 'one size fits all', business-oriented model disregards local contexts and specificities. A globalized approach to development perpetuates existing logics and structures that reinforce inequalities between humans and between humans and non-humans. These include North–South directed solutions, an imposition of ecological consequences on the poorest and most vulnerable groups and the promotion of strategies that serve the interests of global capital. A focus on 'development' illuminates how organizational relations and sustainability are interconnected globally and produce vicious cycles of neglect and un/intended consequences. Contexts differ tremendously and need specific attention and analysis to see the full effects of non/action and power relations. This is, for instance, illustrated by the history of the newly emerging and rapidly expanding industry of 'eco'-tourism, co-opting nature conservation in the South (e.g., Africa, India and Indonesia), with the avowed aim of improving the circumstances of human populations and often with proclaimed benefits for women with family responsibilities. In *Capitalism and Conservation* by Dan Brockington and Rosaleen Duffy (2011) we find ample examples of the intricate networks of the globalizing tourism industry rapidly intensifying conservation via capitalist parameters. The notion of conservation via tourism, and parallel to that alleviating poverty and promising health benefits, especially in a gendered sense, is increasingly exposed as inextricably linked to neoliberal/capitalist inspiration and modes of organization.[1] If we do not insert gender relations into those debates, we miss out on chances of ever finding alternative and sustainable modes of organizing in which inclusion and equality replace a mere economic focus. Insights can be gained by looking at already visible effects of globalization, and analyse these in terms of gender, nature and power simultaneously.

Within management and organization studies, the 'mainstream' literature has long focused on seeking evidence that an ostensibly greener capitalism is good for business and good for the environment; in sum, good for the whole planet. However, the number of voices critiquing current organizational and academic approaches to issues of environmental sustainability have been growing increasingly louder and more frequent. To date, relatively little of this work has done so from the perspective of gender or feminism but that is beginning to change, evidenced by the highly successful streams held at the Gender, Work & Organization conferences in 2012, 2014 and 2016, and from which this Special Issue has been developed, new work being published (e.g., Katz, 2016; Phillips, 2014, 2017; Phillips & Rumens, 2016; Sabelis, van Vliet, & Wels, 2016; Young & Taylor, 2016) while the 2016 meeting of the Academy of Management included a stream on 'Gendering CSR and Sustainability'.

Feminist and gendered approaches to environmental issues differ by nomenclature and nuance. Those working in the intersections of feminism and environmentalism have variously called themselves eco/feminists, ecofeminists, environmental feminists, ecological feminists or feminist political ecologists (Moore, 2016; Sturgeon, 1997). As has been extensively documented elsewhere, ecofeminism was assailed by accusations of essentialism, often by other feminists and often very unfairly (e.g., Biehl, 1991; Jackson, 1995; Leach, 2007). Biehl, in particular, railed at ecofeminism's supposed claims for women's special affinity with nature based in biologically determined and embodied experiences as this colluded with patriarchal notions of the female body (see Gaard, 2011 for a full discussion). It was also argued that ecofeminism ignored intersections of class, geography, ethnicity, sexuality or able-bodiedness in women's experiences and that it was a white women's movement that ignored women of colour. While some early ecofeminist scholarship is indeed a legitimate target for such critiques, the entire *corpus* of ecofeminist work was painted as such. The proliferation of ecofeminisms situated in multiple forms of action and theory that contest relations of power (Sturgeon, 1997) was ignored. However, the accusations stuck to the extent that several erstwhile ecofeminists became reluctant to identify themselves or their work as such (Gaard, 2011; Moore, 2016; Sturgeon, 1997; Twine, 2001). For example, Noel Sturgeon (1997) recounts how she was advised by a prominent feminist theorist to remove the word 'ecofeminism' from the title of a paper and by a mentor to

remove her editorship of *The Ecofeminist Newsletter* from her vita as it would alienate potential readers and employers. Val Plumwood's name is strongly associated with ecofeminism and she is often counted among its foremothers. This is despite the firm critique of the gender essentialism she observed in parts of it in the 1980s. 'Although much must be rejected', she wrote in 1986, 'what can then be salvaged from ecofeminism is a position which sheds valuable light on the conceptual structure of domination, and makes important critical points about the western philosophical tradition' (Plumwood, 1986, p. 120). She labelled her own work 'critical ecological feminism' and with her early principal, ontological and systematic critique of dualisms in western thought she can easily be read as one of the front runners of post-structuralism. This chequered history accounts for much, but not all, of the variation in name but today, ecofeminist thought draws on a range of critical, sociological and political theories (Cudworth, 2005; Plumwood, 1993), which include post-structural feminism (Phillips, 2016), postcolonial theory (Wright, 2016) and queer theory (Gaard, 1997), amongst many others.

There is, nevertheless, a substantial history, at least outside studies of work and organization, of feminist thinking and analysis being applied to environmental issues in theory and to activist practice. Common ground exists in that most see current conceptualizations of the biophysical world as grounded in what Connell (2001) has referred to as hegemonic masculinity. Masculinity is culturally aligned with reason, rationality and the human mind which devalues the feminine, emotion, the body and the natural world (Lloyd, 1993). A genuinely human self is rational, disembodied and sharply differentiated from, for example, emotions, bodies and nature which are construed as inferior and given instrumental value only (Phillips, 2014). This is a long-established argument within feminist philosophies, but its treatment has tended to focus on the implications for gender, instead of what it might mean for gender and nature or for global debates on sustainability. Feminist approaches to environmental sustainability have therefore developed in response to the ways in which 'woman' and 'nature' are conceptually linked in western thought (Bourke, 2011), wherein the processes of inferiorization have been mutually reinforcing. Women, nature and other groups that do not conform to masculine ideals are 'othered' as less than human or non-human to confirm and justify their subordination. For Karen Warren (1996), a failure to recognize the connections between the subordination of women and other marginalized groups and that of nature 'results in inadequate feminisms, environmentalism and environmental philosophies' (p. x). Thus, feminist positions, apart from putting environmental issues on the agenda from the late 1970s on (Mies & Shiva, 1993; Twine, 2001), now also challenge present-day 'mainstream' environmental theory and practice. This assumes a gender neutrality that masks unexamined and concealed assumptions that can be Eurocentric, anthropocentric and androcentric (Plumwood, 2006). As such, feminist and gendered analyses have the potential to mount a radical challenge to current organizational and academic discourses and practices surrounding sustainability, social responsibility and justice (Plumwood, 1993).

Thus, we present here a Special Issue that addresses the most pressing challenge of our time; the sustainability of the 'web of life' in which humans and non-humans are situated such that we give voice to perspectives on the issues our planet is experiencing and facing, but which are generally ignored by the mainstream and particularly by management and organization studies. All contributions place a gendered and/or feminist approach centre stage, albeit from somewhat different perspectives. We have selected six papers ranging from discourse analysis (Irving and Helin) to conceptual development (e.g., Ergene, Calás and Smircich), from explicitly ecofeminist approaches (Biesecker and von Winterfeld; Irving and Helin; Young) to new materialist feminisms (Ergene et al.), from specific contexts such as forestry (Arora-Jonsson and Basnett) to wider considerations of health (MacBride-Stewart et al.) and from business organization (Irving and Helin; Young) to the organization of development (Arora-Jonsson and Basnett; MacBride-Stewart et al.). Many of our contributors point to the inadequacy of conceptual tools that take gender for granted and suggest alternatives which will open up debate; Ergene et al. consider how the Anthropocene demands different ways of thinking and ask for 'ecologies of concern' to inform organization studies, Biesecker and von Winterfeld place their work in the context of 'multiple crisis' and Young plays with the concept of the maternal body and care. At the same time, Arora-Jonsson and Basnett remind us of the need to

engage with systems of global governance where discourses and practices are shaped, and to recognize that contested ideas, such as mainstreaming, are not without value. But what binds the papers together, apart from our central question, is their theory-driven and open exploration of how framing gender and sustainability in the context of work and organization produces practice-oriented insights.

Our collection opens with an imaginatively written paper by Seray Ergene et al. who picture how we are entering the age of the Anthropocene. This enables the authors to wonder what kind of knowledge would be possible, and how Organization Studies would have to change to be able to meet the challenges of this transition. They assemble a variety of feminist ecological perspectives, and rigorously build an analytical lens they label 'ecologies of sustainable concerns', also the title of their paper. A critique of the notion 'matter of fact' is crucial to the development of the analytical lens. A matter of fact is always partial, and following Bruno Latour and Vicky Bell, the authors establish 'matters of concern' as those which encompass the becoming of matters of facts together with 'ecologies of concern' to help us expand our understanding of concrete matters and realities. The lens is applied to two major crises: the collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh in 2013 and the explosion of Deepwater Horizon in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010. Commonly, the understanding of these events is reduced to 'economic facts', not only in the press but also in Organization Studies. In this paper, however, Ergene et al.'s analytical approach uncovers the larger issues at stake.

Our second and third papers focus on some of those larger issues. They take new perspectives on long-standing debates as to how intersections of business and development can best work for the benefit of humans and nature. They look critically at how binary thinking pervades, and perhaps determines, sustainable development on a global level. Sara MacBride-Stewart et al., in a paper entitled 'Towards North–South Interconnectedness', present a careful analysis of how binaries play out globally in debates and policies of sustainability. The uncritical acceptance of, for instance, the primacy of science and technology studies, perpetuates power relations, especially if it prevents us from looking at women in different contexts worldwide. Attacking dualisms means revealing the biases of gendered actors, however well-intentioned, and highlighting the prevalence of economic paradigms which shape decision-making on all levels and which ignore the complexities and elusiveness of existing practices and alternatives.

Even organizations which claim to be working for a transition to a sustainable world can fail to recognize that constructions of gender and nature need to be addressed explicitly to prevent ongoing bias and the taken-for-granted reproduction of gendered ideas. In their paper 'A World for Sale?', Simon Irving and Jenny Helin present a meticulous analysis of a key text by the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, *Vision 2050: A New Agenda for Business*. They reveal how the perpetuation of dualistic assumptions around the construction of gender and nature means that far from providing a 'road-map' out of the current crises, measures are instead promoted that support the current business models and market-oriented (neoliberal) policies that are complicit in the destruction of nature and of self-sufficient, local economies. This implies a neglect of current power relations in a world in which everything relates back to 'the' economy, and disregards any striving for mutuality and interrelation. Drawing on the work of Val Plumwood and other ecofeminist scholars, they shed light on the ways in which the discourses underpinning *Vision 2050* construct women and nature as subordinate, and offer no alternative to changes assumed to be brought about through a continuation of current, 'superior' economic logic.

The destruction wreaked by current logics is underscored by Adelheid Biesecker and Uta von Winterfeld who propose the conceptual framing of a 'multiplicity of crisis' caused by contemporary market capitalism. Their paper 'Notions of Multiple Crisis and Feminist Perspectives on Social Contract' applies Carol Pateman's (1988) critique of social contract theory as being non-inclusive of women, and Val Plumwood's (2002) criticism of western concepts of the autonomous self to an analysis of German public policy for a sustainable future. In one of its reports, the *German Advisory Council on Global Change* suggests a new social contract for sustainability. The paper criticizes the report as highly abstract while its underpinning philosophies are firmly rooted in the construction

of autonomous individuals as self-serving, in the primacy of markets and in the form of rationality that has caused the problems the Council is trying to solve. For the authors, hope lies in the alternative to this: in relations between people in their daily lives, in 'nature-connected' individuals, in new human–nature relations, in social movements which prioritize common good instead of private property, in cooperation instead of competition, and it lies in care and responsibility. In short, they propose 'small and concrete new social contracts'.

Our fifth paper by Ali Young, 'Ruminations on the Value of Care as Sustainable Organizational Practice', also focuses on the importance of caring relations albeit from a very different perspective. Young's jumping off point is the material, maternal body. While recognizing that this could invite the accusations of essentialism that have beset ecofeminism, Young argues that the work of 'mothering' is critical to the wellbeing of communities. However, it has been un- or undervalued such that the multiple crises described by Biesecker and von Winterfeld (this issue) now beset the globe. Her text incorporates what she describes as her own 'reproductive animal being (which is after all the source of all life)' (p. xxx) in an attempt to support balanced organization that reunites body and mind, rather than falls into dualism, polarity and splitting. Young argues that the denial of the M(Other) within organizations has resulted in them lacking care and compassion. If the relational and embodied realities associated with mothering are given a place within organization, the interconnection, co-dependency and relationship necessary for environmental sustainability and social justice might then be empowered. Moreover, this sense of interconnectedness should extend to feminisms where the focus could be on collaboration and the building of alliances rather than on disagreement and difference.

Our final paper, 'Disciplining Gender in Environmental Organizations', returns us to the ways in which policies and discourses of sustainability play out in a specific organization within the context of global environmental governance and the emergence of environmental policy as a distinct field of international politics. Seema Arora-Jonsson and Bimbika Sijapati Basnett use textual analysis and an examination of the practices of gender experts within the Center for International Forestry Research (CIFOR) to explore efforts to 'mainstream gender' such that it is taken into account across the organization's activities. They look at the impacts of such efforts on the ways in which the debates on sustainable practices are framed and everyday practices re-oriented. While staying aware of the potential downsides to gender mainstreaming that have been highlighted by feminist scholars, Arora-Jonsson and Basnett show how, within CIFOR, it is resulting in a 'slow revolution' that is opening up spaces for consideration of gender in relation to power, which, in turn, is resulting in changes in practice. The paper highlights the importance of not shying away from engagements with global policies and global discourses which shape the material practices of sustainability. While demonstrating the limits of mainstreaming, the authors also make visible the opening up of possibilities for contestation and change and highlight the importance of patience and perseverance in bringing about transformation.

The venture of composing this Special Issue provided us with difficult choices, not just because of the number of contributions, but mainly because of the wide vista of opportunities to problematize gender and sustainability in relation to organization as an active, ambiguous and urgent realm of discussion. As mentioned, the contributions we chose ultimately illustrate the variety of topics and theoretical debates that are already possible. We would like to express our appreciation to all involved, including those whose contributions did not make it into this final version; and hope this issue will be followed by wider and even more creative combinations of its central concepts. Developing further our concepts of gender alongside working to build modes of sustainable organization offer opportunities for advancing gender theory as well as charting a passage away from current logics, which have proved so damaging to something that would focus on the flourishing of all beings on this beautiful planet.

Note

1. For health issues and global framing, see also Elisabeth Pisani (2010).

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